

Teacher's Guide: Religion and Tradition in the Ghetto

The Lesson Plan Includes:

- Introduction
- Preparatory class discussion
- Distribution of worksheets: **Closure and Isolation**, and **Religious Life and Tradition in the Ghetto**
- In-class summation

Introduction:

The feeling that life had taken a turn for the worse and the uncertainty of what lay ahead were characteristics of the Holocaust period. The Jewish people's entire world was turned upside-down during the Nazi occupation. In fact, the Jews lived in a time wherein they were not even considered human beings. Their place of residence, life within a family framework, education and personal development, life within a supporting community, the development of spirituality, and life as per their faith and principles, were taken away. . Much effort was required by those who wanted to continue living life according to their spiritual, religious, and nationalistic world-view.

Officially, in most of the places occupied by the Nazis, Jews were prohibited from having any form of cultural and religious life. The adherence to this prohibition varied geographically. This meant that the events that Jews traditionally celebrated would not take place. It was therefore difficult to mark the events of the Jewish calendar as well as to dedicate time to one's personal cycle of life: birth, maturity, and death. All days were supposed to be identical. Cultural events were also banned, therefore limiting Jews' ability to express and develop the spirituality meant to serve as a support system for the community.

Despite the prohibitions, Jews continued to mark these events. The teacher Haim Kaplan wrote in his diary during his time in the Warsaw Ghetto, "Everything is forbidden to us, yet we do everything."

Social and religious events served as a ray of light to many people who felt darkness overtaking their lives. An active religious life which included study, prayer, and the fulfillment of the *mitzvot* (commandments) took place while putting their lives at risk. Man's spirituality and creativity were food for the Jewish soul and allowed them to

comprehend the reality of their lives through the perspective of past generations. Various holidays took on deeper meaning. The Passover holiday which represents the passage from slavery to freedom, took on new meaning for those who saw themselves during the Holocaust as slaves waiting for their salvation. During Hanukkah, the Maccabim overcame the Greeks and gained national salvation. Families who were lucky enough to hold bar-mitzvah celebrations for their children felt that they were continuing the existence of Jewish life. The latter raised the spirits of many Jews, enabling them to rise above their daily troubles and worries¹.

These acts of defiance represented a spiritual resistance on the Jews' part – both the secular and religious – who reacted as per their traditional way of thinking.

The following lesson plan, concerning religion and tradition in the ghetto, will focus on the celebration of the bar-mitzvah ceremony and the holiday of Hanukkah in the ghettos.

During the preparatory discussion and the in-class summation, a number of questions are raised which the students will have to answer during their individual work on the worksheets and the website. The format of the discussion as presented below is purely a suggestion: some of the questions can be used or all of them.


The purpose of the preparatory discussion, and its place during the opening lesson, is to focus the students on the lesson's subject and the issues that arise from it. Therefore we will discuss the meanings of the Hanukkah holiday and the bar-mitzvah ceremony and each one's symbolism.. Later on, we will try to clarify how the Jews' living conditions under Nazi occupation affected the possibility of celebrating the traditional events, the meaning each one was granted during the Holocaust and their place in the Jewish attempt to cope during this period.

Introduction: (Preparatory discussion in class)

- Hanukkah:
 - What historical event does the Hanukkah holiday commemorate? Why do Jews celebrate Hanukkah? What does it symbolize?
 - Does Hanukkah have any other names? Why is Hanukkah also called the **Festival of Lights**?

¹ From: Relationships, Study Units on Heritage: Introduction, Yad Vashem Publication, the International School for Holocaust Studies, Jerusalem, 2002.

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- In your opinion, what was Hanukkah's significance during the Holocaust?
 - What were the problems faced by children and their families who wanted to celebrate Hanukkah during the Holocaust?
- Bar-Mitzvah:
- What is the bar-mitzvah ceremony? What is the purpose of the bar-mitzvah ceremony? What is the meaning of the bar-mitzvah?
 - What is required to celebrate a bar-mitzvah?
 - What problems did children and their families face to celebrate a bar-mitzvah during the Holocaust?
- Visit the **Children in the Ghetto** website <http://ghetto.galim.org.il/> and click on **Entrance** icon .

Upon entering, you will see an imaginary street in front of you, this street represents the ghetto. You can navigate around the street with the arrows found on its sides.



- The highlighted drawings are portals to sections on various subjects regarding the world of the ghetto.
- Each section can also be viewed by clicking on the matching icon at the bottom of the street.

Above the bookseller's stand on the right, there is a lit up window wherein you can see a boy wrapped in a Talith (prayer shawl) who is putting on Tfillin (phylacteries). Click on the window to enter the **Bar/Bat-Mitzvah in the Ghetto** section.



(At the bottom of the street there are icons through which you can view the various sections. This section can be accessed by clicking on the icon  at the bottom of the street).




1. Read the explanation and look at the photograph next to it.

● **Something to think about:**

- In your opinion, what additional significance did the bar-mitzvah ceremony gain during the Holocaust?
- What were the problems faced by the children and their families who wished to celebrate a bar-mitzvah during the Holocaust?

We will try to answer these questions during the in class summation

2. a) Read the testimonies of Israel Ernest and Moshe Porath (**On Paper** icon ) and complete the tasks at hand.
b) Choosing from the testimony excerpts, what is in your opinion, the most important thing for the storyteller. Explain why you made this choice.
3. a) Look at the *talith* (prayer shawl) and the prayer shawl bag Yiji Bader received for his Bar-mitzvah (**Artifact** icon ) and answer the questions next to them.
b) **A question for 4th and 5th graders:** Why was Yiji's bar-mitzvah ceremony held when he was 14 rather than 13 years old?
b) **A question for 6th to 8th graders:** Yiji celebrated his bar-mitzvah when he was 14 years old because the year before, when he was 13 years old, his family could not perform the ceremony. In your opinion, why was it important for his family to celebrate the bar-mitzvah ceremony in the ghetto despite the fact that it was not celebrated at the right age?

- Return to the street (link on the bottom left hand side of the screen **Back to the street** . 
- Scroll right with the assistance of the arrow  until you reach the end of the street. In the upper left hand window there is drawing of a Hanukkah: click on the link to enter the **Hanukkah in the Ghetto** section. (This section can be accessed by clicking on the icon  at the bottom of the street).

1.

- Something to think about:
 - What is a miracle?
 - In your opinion, what did the word miracle signify for the children living in the ghetto?
 - In your opinion, what additional meaning did Hanukkah have during the Holocaust?

We will try to answer these questions during the in-class summation.

2. a) Read the excerpt from Emanuel Ringelblum's writings (**On Paper** icon ) and complete the tasks at hand.

b) Emanuel Ringelblum wrote about events that took place in the ghetto during the Hanukkah holiday. Of the events mentioned, which ones remind you of the way Jews celebrate Hanukkah today?

Note to the Teacher: Within the excerpt of Emmanuel Ringelblum's writings we can see an analogy to the life of children today: Other than the traditional candle-lighting we are told through Ringelblum's writings of the hundreds of children's plays and balls that were held in the Warsaw Ghetto throughout the holiday, these were performed in an effort to continue the way of life known to the Jews before the war. Today the Hanukkah holiday is characterized by a large number of plays, balls, and shows for children.)

c) In light of what you read: why do you think it was important for the ghetto's residents to celebrate the Hanukkah holiday?

What did celebrating the holiday symbolize for them?

3. Look at the photograph (**Photograph** icon ) and the artifacts (**Artifact** icon



) in this section, answer the questions and complete the tasks at hand.

4. **Summarizing Question:**

In your opinion, what role did holidays and tradition play for Jews coping with the Holocaust?

In-class Summation:

- Today we attribute certain meanings to the bar-mitzvah ceremony. Were these meanings the same during the Holocaust? What additional meanings did the bar/bat-mitzvah acquire at the time of the Holocaust?

(Note to the Teacher: in Judaism the bar-mitzvah ceremony is the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. Girls at the age of 12 and boys at the age of 13 are considered to be responsible for their actions and are obligated to uphold the *mitzvot*. The ceremony symbolizes, to those celebrating, the process of becoming adults, a process, which is accompanied by an adult who guides them through.

The difficult conditions which existed as a result of the war and during the Jews' confinement to the ghettos, forced children to become responsible for their actions, for themselves and at times for their families. In this role, such children became known as "adult-children." During this period, children were thrown into the adult world, at times when their parents were no longer present and there was no adult figure to accompany them through their transition from childhood to adulthood. There is no doubt that for the few children who celebrated their bar-mitzvah during the Holocaust, the ceremony held particular significance, although the ceremony's significance was different as were all the other aspects of life).

- What additional significance did Hanukkah have during the Holocaust?
- What was the significance of holidays and traditional events to Jews who were struggling to cope with the difficulties of the Holocaust?